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ABSTRACT

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The Transition from Traditional
to Whole Language Instruction:
A Continuum From Reformers To Resisters

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Paper presented at the annual meeting
of the National Reading Conference
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Abstract

Factors that influenced teachers to become reformers, reviewers or resisters to a whole language were investigated with specific examination of school culture. In this study three transitioning school sites were selected on the basis of their similarity in staffing and student size. Participants from each school involved three to four classroom teachers that were in various stages of transition; their Chapter I teacher; the Chapter I director; and the principal. The researcher audiotaped all seventeen interviews; collected teachers' lesson plans, and took photographs of the classrooms. A phenomenological approach to the data analysis resulted in nine categories directly related to the teachers' attitudes toward a transition to a whole language. These categories revealed three external influences and three subjective influences. The external influences which consisted of the Chapter I program, school culture, and the role of the principal had a stronger influence on those teachers resisting or reviewing the whole language while the subjective factors such as, knowledge of whole language, professional development, and level of acceptance had a stronger influence on those teachers already involved in the transition. The researcher concluded that the three school's cultures by allowing interaction among reviewing, resisting, and reforming teachers created trust which is needed in order for a stable change to occur.

An Examination Of A Transition From Traditional to Whole Language Instruction

The whole language movement has been described as "... an epidemic, wildfire, manna from heaven --- (it) has spread so rapidly throughout North America that it is a fact of life in literacy curriculum and research." (Pearson, 1989). Despite its inception as a teacher-generated effort, many teachers are resisting the change to whole language. This resistance is conjectured to stem from a variety of sources. Tenured teachers feel comfortable and capable with the formulated curriculums of basal programs (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, in press). Novice teachers, insecure in their initial experience, are trying to just survive their first years (Berliner, 1986). Other, already beleaguered, teachers find it difficult to implement a new program that often requires a great deal of time, energy, and relearning (Goodman and Goodman, 1989). Notwithstanding these difficulties, many schools are making this transition.

Putting aside conjecture, research has explored teacher responses to change. Ridley (1990) found that teachers responded in one of three ways: advocacy of whole language theory and application; interest in only the application; or disinterest in both theory and application. Fagan (1987) has examined differences in teacher adoption based upon degrees of knowledge concerning the whole language philosophy. He states that in many cases, teacher bias towards a whole language method of instruction is based upon lack of knowledge regarding its philosophy. Goodlad's work (1979) outlined three factors that discouraged teachers from making instructional changes: isolation, lack of encouragement, and lack of idea-sharing.

While studies of teacher transition to whole language are limited, there are numerous studies examining factors that affect change in general. These studies have examined the role of the principal's affect upon teacher change compared to an outside change agent. Hall and Hoard (1987) have found that persons outside a school's staff seldom bring about change. Lieberman and Miller (1981) charged that the principal is the critical person in the change process. They

found that principal's actions during the change process can greatly affect the eventual success or failure of the innovation. Thomas (1978) found that greater success with change resulted when the principal assumed the role of facilitator rather than a director or administrator. Hall & Rutherford (1983) further investigated facilitator styles found that the manager style (one, who helps the change to happen) to be more successful in affecting teacher change. While research in general recognizes the principal's role as a factor in affecting teacher change, research on principal's roles in relationship to whole language acceptance has not been reported.

Finally, teacher change is an individual decision. To date, research concerning teachers' responses to educational change has concentrated on those who accept change, reformers, and those who reject change, resisters, (Kanchier & Unruh, 1988; Huberman, 1973). Perhaps, this change is neither an all or nothing response, but rather a continuum. This continuum would include not only reformers and resisters, but also reviewers: those teachers, who had not as yet adopted the innovation. In addition, the only external factor considered to affect a change was the principal's influence. Could there be other external factors? Finally, current research on teacher responses to a whole language has not been based upon first hand accounts. Knowledge of these responses may facilitate further understanding of change. Through interviews, observations, and examinations of written documents and classroom photographs, this study was designed to seek answers to the following questions: (1) What factors influence a teacher to either adopt or resist a whole language curriculum? (2) Is change on a continuum that includes reviewers as well as reformers and resisters?

Method

Participants and Schools

Schools. The participants were selected from three different schools located within one school district in a small mid-Atlantic State. These schools were similar in size and number of

students and faculty. Each of the three schools had begun the transition into whole language from different perspectives. In the first school, Salem Elementary, the fourteen teachers had worked for several years to improve reading instruction, implementing Sustained Silent Reading, daily read alouds, and reading incentive programs for their at-risk students. Impetus was provided by the arrival of a whole language teacher whose enthusiasm sparked an interest in her colleagues to undertake a whole language in their classrooms. The second school, Concord Elementary, became a Professional Development School in collaboration with a local university. The seven member faculty selected whole language as a future direction for their school in order to address the literacy needs of their multicultural school population. This decision related in part to a faculty member who used whole language exclusively in her teaching and possessed a solid knowledge base in whole language. In the third school, Richmond Elementary, one of the teachers had attended a week-long whole language workshop in Boston during her summer vacation. Upon returning, she announced that in the forth-coming year she would use whole language rather than the basal method. This produced a rippling effect upon the other teachers at her grade level. As a result, whole language was in the process of being adopted by several of the seventeen teachers throughout the school.

Participants. Teachers at each school were identified as either adopting, or rejecting the whole language curriculum. In order to ascertain whether a group of teachers were reviewers, teachers who were attempting to practice some aspects of whole language were also selected. Initially, three teachers and the principals from each of the three schools were included. It was felt that the principals from each of the three schools would be able to provide an understanding of the overall change environment. As the study progressed, it became apparent that additional participants needed to be involved. Interviews with the original twelve participants, pointed out that the Chapter I teachers had affected the transition of the teachers in all three schools. This resulted in their inclusion in the study. The Director of Chapter I was also interviewed in an

attempt to understand her influence upon the Chapter I program . A fourth teacher was interviewed at the Salem School after one of the three initial teachers appeared to be incorrectly identified as a resistor. Thus, four more participants were added to the study bringing the total to seventeen participants interviewed. Demographic information for each teacher is included in Table 1, with each teacher's name changed to protect their confidentiality.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedures

Establishing a committee of experts. In order to begin the study it was first necessary to establish a committee of experts. The purpose of this committee was to locate schools which were actively in the process of a whole language change and then identify those teachers who range from reformers to resisters. The committee consisted of a university professor in charge of supervising field placements in the county, a reading professor involved with placement of university reading students, and an experienced Chapter I teacher in the county. The committee recommended the following method of grouping: those teachers, who initiated or propelled the whole language transition at their school, be labeled reformers; those teachers choosing to utilize an alternative

basal method despite their colleagues's endorsement, should be referred to as resisters; and those teachers who attempted to practice some aspect of a whole language curriculum be called reviewers. All three committee members were familiar with the county's schools and their teaching staff through their involvement with student placement and were knowledgeable of whole language curriculum. The committee began by recommending three schools that endorsed the use of a whole language curriculum. Finally, they narrowed down those teachers, who they had observed as conforming to these categories.

Data collection. The teachers were interviewed for one to two hours using an informal semi-structured interview schedule. These questions were designed to ascertain both grouping information as well as influences involving attitudes toward whole language. Interview questions focused upon philosophical beliefs along with teaching practices. Follow-up interviews of approximately 30 minutes were conducted to clarify points as needed after the initial interviews had been transcribed. Each participant read their transcripts in order to verify any misconceptions that might have been implied. Each teacher was observed during their reading or language arts instructional periods for two days and detailed field notes were recorded. Photographs of each classroom were taken and photocopies of the teacher's lesson plans for a two week period were collected. This data would confirm the types of activities typical of a whole language curriculum as endorsed by authorities in the field. The principal of each participating school was interviewed with the focus being on perceptions of his leadership role, interactions with the faculty, and the extent to which the principal's actions affected the transition to a whole language. In addition, the researcher kept a detailed journal in which personal reflections of interviews and observations were recorded.

Analysis

The purpose of the analysis was to establish specific factors which lead these teachers to resist or adopt a whole language curriculum. The analysis viewed the whole language transition as

a phenomena (an exceptional event), and analysed the data from a phenomenological perspective, following the recommendations of Hycner (1985). This method involved creating specific interview questions which would ascertain the participants' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding a whole language transition and if they had made any attempts to change. All interviews were audiotaped. After listening to the tapes several times in order to understand the tone and meaning of the statements, they were transcribed. The transcriptions were then segmented into idea units pertaining to a particular area of discussion, such as facilitating a change. Later, these idea units were categorized as belonging to particular groups. An example of a category was the role of the principal. These categories were utilized to answer the research questions. Validity for the categories was established by triangulating the data from the transcripts with the photographs, the teachers' lesson plans, administrator's implementation plans, and the researcher's journal notes. Two graduate students were asked to independently categorize 500 idea units using the categories already identified. An intercoder reliability of .87 was found.

Results

The analysis of the qualitative data indicated that specific factors had influenced the teachers in their decision to either adopt or reject whole language. In addition, the data collaborated the hypothesis that teacher change had occurred on a continuum which included reformers as well as reformers and resisters. Six categories emerged which were shown to influence teacher change. The first three categories pertained to influences outside the teacher. The last three categories related to subjective phenomena that reflected not only their placement on the continuum, but their decision toward adoption or rejection of whole language. The three categories for the external influences included: (a) the Chapter I program, (b) school culture, and (c) the principal's role. The three categories for subjective phenomena consisted of: (a) knowledge of whole language, (b)

attitude toward change, and (c) orientation to professional development.

Influences Outside the Teacher That Affected the Change Decision

The Chapter I Program. The outside influence to have the most affect on teacher adoption was the Chapter I Program. Through this program, classroom teachers had the opportunity to observe a Chapter I teacher using a whole language approach right in their own classroom. This was due to the nature of the Chapter I Program: a "push-in" format with a whole language base. This type of format also demonstrated to the classroom teacher the Chapter I teacher's expertise in whole language. This expertise eventually lead to further collaboration with identified reformers, and request from reviewers to explain whole language concepts. In addition, both the Richmond and the Salem principals relied on their Chapter I teachers for whole language knowledge, "...most of my information comes from my Chapter I teachers because they're really knowledgeable." Initially, it was found that some classroom teachers resisted the whole language 'push-in' program. The director identified the problem as being related to "turfsmanship", but that "they [Chapter I and classroom teachers] gradually worked it out" with most teachers. Those teachers, labeled as resistors, stated that they preferred the former Chapter I method of removing children from the classroom and tended to be less cooperative with the "push-in" format.

School Culture. School culture was also shown to have had a strong influence upon a teacher's transition. The category of school culture included both faculty relationships and resources. Of these two areas faculty relationships were perceived as playing a more important role. Ann, the Chapter I teacher at Concord, explained, "Taking four or five years to build the respect for each other as colleagues, created the trust which allowed them to accept my program into their classrooms." Other teachers agreed. Calla, identified as a reformer, stated, "In the beginning I really wasn't sure what to do; how to do it; where to begin; or what I needed. It was nice knowing there were others in the building I could go to for help."

The transitioning teachers tended to encourage and support other teachers who showed interest. Karen, labeled a reformer at Richmond, pointed this out. "I think it was the influence of their peers. You find that teachers, who are receptive to whole language, are also receptive to sharing." Along with support, the teachers mentioned that a lack of criticism by others was essential. At Salem School, Sean, a reviewer, stated, "I think workshops help, but I think Chris (a fellow whole language teacher) is exciting and that's contagious." Ann, a Chapter I teacher, adds to that. "If teachers try and they are allowed to fail, the teachers know that no one will be offend." Not all the participants agreed with Ann. Both reviewers as well as resisters mentioned feeling pressured by either their principal or colleagues to make a change. A reviewer at Salem stated that her principal had told them that they **had** to use whole language, while at Concord attitudes, between those transitioning and those resisting, had frequently caused arguments.

While support by colleagues was perceived as essential, the participants felt that resources frequently made a critical difference in the extent of adoption. Materials for a whole language curriculum were frequently not available because they sharply differed from those of a basal format. This shortage tended to stall those identified as reviewers and frustrate reformers. Reviewers like Rana and Channa, who had wanted to incorporate whole language, claimed that they "didn't know how, without some type of training". Reformers frequently spoke of their need for time. Karen explained, "I know it's going to get easier once I develop my units, but right now starting out, it's very difficult and I spent an awful lot of personal time." Reviewers and reformers cited a lack of materials, whole language training, and time as affecting the extent of their change.

The Principal's Influence. The principal's influence was generally perceived as having more of an affect on those who were either reviewing or resisting change than on those who had already adopted the change. This influence was transmitted through (a) his motive for change; (b) his whole language knowledge; (c) perception of his role during this change; and (d) his plan for

the transition.

All three principals verbally acknowledged that they wanted their schools to become whole language schools, but differed in their motives. The Richmond principal, was looking for a way to improve test scores for his at-risk students. He became interested in whole language upon discovering that the second grade CTBS (California Test of Basic Achievement) test scores had increased using a whole language curriculum. Similarly, the Salem School principal believed the curriculum was so beneficial it would eventually become "the predominantly used reading program". In contrast, the Concord School principal was motivated to change in order to maintain his prestige with his superiors. "I feel that we (principals) are in competition to a degree. Therefore, if another school is using whole language, I had best do the same."

The amount of knowledge the principals had acquired about whole language varied. The Richmond principal stated that he really didn't a true "grasp" of the program, while the Concord principal connected whole with "having the fun part first and picking up the skills later." The Salem principal possessed the most knowledge on whole language. He believed that it "integrated reading, grammar, spelling, writing, and integrated into a program that produces a more literate student."

The three principals also differed in how they perceived their roles in relationship to the transition. The Salem principal believed it was his job "to promote the whole language philosophy and let the individual teacher arrive at his or her own decision." The Richmond principal preferred to facilitate his teachers transition by providing resources. The Concord principal could not clearly explain his role and when probed he answered in a roundabout fashion.

Two of the three principals had definite plans for implementing whole language throughout their school. The Salem principal provided his teachers with journal articles, speakers, and workshops and felt that the process should be completed in phases. The Richmond principal stated that the faculty senate had a basic plan and "he had some basic ideas on the direction of the

curriculum, but was not sure about all areas." The Concord principal did not have a plan of his own, but referred to the Barker Project (a university restructuring program) as a means of transitioning. He left the development of the transition in the hands of his staff.

Subjective Phenomena Verbalized by the Participants

Knowledge of Whole Language. Teacher knowledge about whole language ranged from lack of understanding to a well-organized framework of the philosophy. Lack of knowledge related to a rejection of whole language. Patty, at Richmond School, was typical of this group, as she explained why she felt whole language was inappropriate for first graders. She said, "Well, I could tell you more about why I feel like that, if I knew more about the whole language process."

Resistors were either uninformed or understood the concepts, but misinterpreted how they might be incorporated in the classroom setting. Shauna at Concord school was an example. She had a fairly accurate definition of whole language, but rejected it because she believed that this method required a different spelling list for each student.

The more knowledgeable teachers tended to be the reformers and had acquired their knowledge in many ways. These included attending workshops, classes, or reading articles. These teachers frequently shared articles with other staff members. At different times over a two year period, all three schools had 'support groups'. At first, they had support groups with other schools and later, among their own faculty. The purpose of these groups was to share ideas, activities, and basic information. Reviewers tended to pick up 'phrases or activities' that they connected with whole language by listening to their colleagues. Resistors, who were least knowledgeable, tended not to attend these meetings and frequently relied on misunderstood information to base their decision for resisting.

Attitudes Toward Change. The teacher's degree of transition tended to reflect the degree of acceptance toward the change to whole language. For those who were reformers, the change

of acceptance toward the change to whole language. For those who were reformers, the change was often a sudden realization instigated by a class or conference. Karen, a reformer at Richmond, explains: "Two years ago I went to a whole language conference in Boston put on by Bill Martin. It really changed my way of thinking...it became very simple to me and it clicked." The director of Chapter One, Marilyn, felt a need to change while teaching a class on reading. She explained, "That was a real professional change in my life, because up until that point I was stagnant." For reviewers the change tended to be more gradual. Sally, a reviewer at Richmond, was one of those: "I feel like, last year I did very little whole language....this year I have done a little more using some whole language techniques."

Depending on the principal's role in the change resisters and reviewers tended to perceive the change as either not affecting them or felt pressured. For example, Channon, a reviewer at Salem, stated: "... first we were told that if we wanted to try whole language.... we could, but it wasn't mandatory. Then as time went by pretty much we were told this is gona be a school-wide thing and you will be doing whole language and if that was a problem then you better look at other things to do in your career." In contrast reviewers and resisters at Concord and Richmond voiced little concern regarding a need to change.

Orientation to Professional Development. There was a marked difference between reformers, reviewers, and resisters in regards to professional development. Those teachers labeled reformers actively searched for conferences or workshops, were working on graduate degree programs, and read professional journals extensively. They stated that they utilized their knowledge to expand and improve their approaches. They referred to conferences and workshops as a means of renewing their professional beliefs, and journal articles as a source for idea-sharing.

Reviewers, while recognizing a need for professional development, complained about the lack of training and a need for more information. Unlike the reformers, they did not seek information or training on their own, but felt it should be provided by the schools or district. They

frequently requested someone to come to their school and demonstrate how to "do" whole language. In contrast, the resisters never mentioned professional development during their interviews. They relied on their previous college classes, their own teaching experience, and even childhood remembrances of learning experiences to enhance their teaching methods.

Summary and Conclusions

The first purpose of this study was to determine whether or not change exists on a continuum for teachers that includes reviewers as well as reformers and resisters. Overwhelming evidence during this study pointed out that change did occur on a continuum. A large number of teachers were either reviewers or had been reviewers before adopting the change. Likewise, some resisters became reviewers upon further exposure to their colleagues influences and knowledge regarding the new curriculum. This agrees to some extent with Ridley's research (1990). Reformers appear to accept the change in both theory and application, while resisters rejected the change in both theory and application. Whether or not the reviewers accepted only the application while not accepting the theory is debatable. Some reviewers as well as reformers believed in the theory, but found it difficult to translate it into application. Further study on teacher's levels of transition are needed to clarify this point.

The second purpose of this study was to examine the factors that influence teachers to either adopt or resist a whole language curriculum. Six factors were found, three external and three subjective. The external factors tended to have more of an influence upon reviewers and resisters, than reformers, while the subjective factors tended to have a greater influence on reformers. Only one external factor, Chapter I, was an impetus for transition for all types of teachers at all three schools. A study by Hall & Hoard (1987) found that persons outside a school's staff seldom bring about change however, Chapter I was shown to be a successful influence for change at these schools. Perhaps this success can be contributed to the development

of trust among staff members, which served to increase acceptance of whole language among the teachers. This Chapter I "push-in" program was an innovative format unique to this school district. Future studies need to investigate if other Chapter I "push-in" whole language programs would have similar affects.

School culture was found to be a contributing condition that either facilitated or discouraged acceptance of that change. The aspects of school culture had a cogent effect upon both reviewers and reformers toward change, since resisters tended to isolate. This finding was consistent with Goodlad's work (1979). Likewise, reviewer's and reformer's trust and respect for one another fostered favorable responses to change in whole language. This finding is supported by Small (1990) who found that teacher trust removed barriers to change. Since trust requires a period of time, time may be considered a factor in the change process. Likewise, a change in the school's culture, such as changes in staff members, may affect the present status of a school's transition. Further research is needed to investigate the influence these two factors may have upon reformers, reviewers, and resisters.

The role of principal had less of an influence on teachers than the other external factors. Probably, this was due to the mixed influence the principal had on all teachers. In some instances, the principals pressure their teachers to make the change which was perceived as encouragement by reformers, but as unwanted pressure by reviewers. In other instances, the principal agreed to a whole language curriculum, but still required the use of phonics workbooks. While many studies (Lieberman & Miller, 1981; Ross, 1951; Thomas, 1978) have shown that the principal plays the key role in adoption, these results indicated that the principal's role was not as important to the change. A majority of teachers at all three schools were attempting to implement whole language to some degree, either because or despite their principal's attitude. This may be explained by the fact that many reviewers and reformers tended to seek support from their colleagues rather than the principal. Further research is needed in order to investigate this phenomenon.

Subjective factors had a greater affect on reformers, than on reviewers and resisters. All the reformers and some of the reviewers had attended conferences or workshops through their own initiative, unlike resisters. This seemed to be an effective influence for enabling those teachers to attempt a change. Perhaps, more information may transform a resistor into a reviewer of whole language. A stronger knowledge-base for resisters may dispell some of the fears and misinformation generated by a change to a whole language. Since it was not possible to ascertain whether professional development reinforced pre-conceived philosophical views or generated new philosophical views in a more acceptable mode, future studies need to clarify this point.

To conclude, this study was unique in two ways. First, while most curriculum changes are administratively mandated, rather than decided by personal choice, this study offered an opportunity to examine those factors which were general, personel, and incidental to this change process. Secondly, this change required an acceptance of a philosophy, that sharply differed from the present system, rather than an alternative in teaching practices. As Newman and Church (1987) stated an understanding of the whole language philosophy is crucial to its implementation. The reformers acceptanced this philosophy; reviewers pondered it; and resisters rejected it. It can be suggested that the reformer's maturity and longer teaching experience afforded them the time and knowledge to critically examine their philosophy in relationship to their teaching practices. The reviewers relationship with reformers aided them in their acquisition of knowledge while their relationship with resisters cautioned them to view this change critically. Perhaps, the reviewers by their cautious inquiry and sluggish acceptance, served a purpose in the change process by maintaining a balance between eager reformers and unbending resisters. In examining these relationships there appeared to be a need for reformers, reviewers, and resisters in order for a stable change to occur. The school culture afforded this interaction which help to build the trust needed for change. Thus, it may be concluded that when the school culture is fraught with personality conflict rather than respect for differing views, change will be hampered.

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Table 1

Information On Participating Teachers

Code	Teaching	Grade	Professional		Age	
<u>Name</u>	<u>Experience</u>	<u>Level</u>	<u>Degree</u>	<u>Development</u>	<u>School</u>	<u>Range</u>
1. Patty	5	1	BA+15	Working On MA	Richmond	1
2. Sally	14	1	MA	Reads Journals	Richmond	2
3. Karen	12	3	MA	Conferences	Richmond	2
4. Cherry	14	Ch 1	2 MA	Reads/ Conf+	Richmond	2
5. Dana	7	3	MA	Conferences	Salem	1
6. Channa	8	6	BA+	None	Salem	1
7. Calla	19	5	MA+	Reads/ Conf+	Salem	2
8. Sean	17	5	BA+30	Working On MA*	Salem	2
9. Vana	13	Ch 1	MA	Conferences	Salem	2
10. Rana	19	3	BA	Conferences*	Concord	2
11. Marilyn	25	K	MA	Reads/ Conf+	Concord	3
12. Shauna	16	5	MA	Conferences	Concord	2
13. Ann	19	Ch 1	MA	Reads/ Conf+	Concord	3

Note. * = These conferences and / or degree were in areas unrelated to reading or whole language;

+ = These teachers presented at conferences as well as attended; 1= 20 - 35 years of age; 2= 36 - 49 years of age; 3= 51 - 65 years of age.